

NO HORN OF PLENTY

More rhinos will be killed in the next two years than will be born, so those charged with saving the endangered animal are considering radical and previously unimaginable solutions. By **Anthony Ham**.

The battle to save the African rhinoceros has all the ingredients for a Hollywood thriller. There are armed baddies with good guys in hot pursuit. There is a hint of glamour. And the drama is played out against a backdrop of a beautiful, bloodstained landscape.

It is a story that begins, perhaps improbably, in Vietnam soon after the turn of the 21st century. A Vietnamese official of some influence, so the story

goes, lets it be known that he, or perhaps it is his wife (for the sake of the story it matters little), has been cured of cancer. The miracle cure? Rhino horn powder.

With disconcerting speed, the story shifts to southern Africa, where a series of gunshots ring out across the African plains. This is followed by the hacking sound of machetes – it takes little time to dehorn a rhino because its horn consists not of bone but of keratin fibres with the density of tightly compressed hair or fingernails.

The getaway begins, armed rangers give chase. Once the horn leaves the flimsy protection of the national park or game reserve, where its former owner lies bleeding to death, it may never be found, its new owners never brought to justice. Sometimes they are caught. Sometimes they get away. Either way, another rhino is dead in a war that the bad guys seem to be winning.

The story shifts again, back to Vietnam where even the prime minister is rumoured to have survived a life-threatening illness after ingesting rhino horn. More than a cure for the country's rich and powerful, however, rhino horn has by now crossed into the mainstream.

Young Vietnamese mothers have taken to keeping at hand a supply of rhino horn to treat high fevers and other childhood ailments.

It is also the drug of choice for minor complaints associated more with the affluent lifestyle to which increasing numbers of Vietnamese have access; rhino horn has become a cure-all pick-me-up, a tonic, an elixir for hangovers.

With this new popularity has come the essential paraphernalia common to lifestyle drugs the world over, including bowls with specially designed serrated edges for

grinding rhino horn into powder. In a short space of time, rhino horn has become the latest must-have accessory for the nouveau riche.

The sudden spike in Vietnamese demand, the miraculous fame of a saved official or his wife, and rhino horn's emergence as a symbol of status all came at a time when legal stockpiles of rhino horn were at an all-time low. Demand and supply. This is the irrefutable law of economics.

Or, as one expert in the illegal trade in rhino horn put it: "It was a perfect storm of deadly consumption."

The rhinoceros is one of the oldest creatures on earth, one of just two survivors – the other is the elephant – of the megaherbivores that once counted dinosaurs among their number. Scientists believe rhinos have changed little in 40 million years.

The rhino's unmistakable echo of the prehistoric and the mystery that surrounds such ancient creatures – this is the animal that Marco Polo mistook for a unicorn, describing it as having the feet of an elephant, the head of a wild boar and hair like a buffalo – have always been its nemesis.

As early as the first century AD, Greek traders travelled to the east, where the rhino horn powder they carried was prized as an aphrodisiac. But the rhino survived and, by the beginning of the 20th century, rhino numbers ran into the hundreds of thousands.

They were certainly plentiful in 1915 when the Roosevelts travelled to Africa to hunt. Kermit, the son, observed a rhinoceros "standing there in the middle of the African plain, deep in prehistoric thought", to which Theodore the father is quoted as replying: "Indeed, the rhinoceros does seem like a survival from the elder world that has vanished."

The Roosevelts then proceeded to shoot them.

Rhinos are epic creatures, gunmetal grey and the second-largest land animal on earth. Up to five metres long and weighing as much as 2700 kilograms, the white rhino, the largest of all rhino species, can live up to 50 years if left to grow old in the wild. In an example of advanced evolution-

ary adaptability, the black rhino will happily choose from about 220 plant species, eating more than 70 kilograms of plants a day.

These impressive numbers, combined with some of the rhino's more limiting characteristics – it has very poor eyesight – have added to the myth that surrounds it.

"A slight movement may bring on a rhino charge," reported nature writer Peter Matthiessen in the 1960s. "Its poor vision cannot make out what's moving and its nerves cannot tolerate suspense."

Thus it was that the rhinoceros became a permanent member of the "big five", the roll-call of the most dangerous animals in Africa as defined by professional hunters.

But respect has always been tinged with derision. "I do not see how the rhinoceros can be permanently preserved," Theodore Roosevelt is reported as wondering, "save in very out-of-the-way places or in regular game reserves... the beast's stupidity, curiosity and truculence make up a combination of qualities which inevitably tend to ensure its destruction."

In the 1960s, one eminent scientist described the rhinoceros as "a very pathetic prehistoric creature, quite unable to adapt itself to modern times. It is our duty to save and preserve this short-tempered, prehistorically stupid but nevertheless so immensely loveable creature."

Such disparaging remarks aside, they were, of course, right to be worried.

We have been here before when it comes to saving the rhino. In 1960, an estimated 100,000 black rhinos roamed across Africa, absent only from tropical rainforests and the Sahara. By 1981, 15,000 remained. In 1995, there were just 2410 left on the continent. In 2006, the western black rhino was declared extinct.

In Kenya, the numbers of black rhino fell from 20,000 at the beginning of the 1970s to 300 within a decade. This catastrophic fall in rhino numbers was the consequence of a poaching slaughter that consumed the country's wildlife as lucrative ivory and rhino horn was consumed to meet

